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Britain's Fourth Afghan War, Through the Lens of Three Others

By JOHN F. BURNS

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Among the promotional posters displayed besides the escalators in London's Underground in recent weeks, there has been one, starker than others in black and white, that has caught the eye.

Against the background of a faded, 19th-century military map of Afghanistan, it displays the words of Field Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, V.C., who commanded the British field force in the Second Afghan War, from 1879 to 1880, one of three imperial wars in Afghanistan that cost Britain heavily in blood, treasure and prestige, and which have stood ever since as a warning against military involvement there.

"I feel sure I am right when I say that the less the Afghans see of us, the less they will dislike us," the field marshal said, in a citation dated by the poster as having been made in 1880.

The poster is a promotional device for an exhibition at the National Army Museum — a beautifully worked display of artifacts and documents from the trio of wars that Britain

fought in Afghanistan between 1838 and 1919. It offers an array of maps, photographs, paintings, sketches and mementos — a pair of padded boots from the bitter winter of 1841-1842, a pith helmet, a steel saber, an Afghan musket, a fraying Union Jack woven in a Kabul bazaar, a regimental drum, two Victoria Crosses, and much besides, including touch-screen videos that have contemporary actors in period dress reading in somber fashion from the diaries and field reports of the time.

In more than two decades of reporting from and about Afghanistan, nothing I have seen has brought so vividly to life what those long-ago battles were like. But what gives the exhibit an even more compelling dimension is that it is being held at a time when Britain and the United States, the two principal force-providers in the 42-nation coalition fighting the current conflict, are weighing whether there is a realistic hope of prevailing in the battle against al Qaeda and the Taliban, or whether the moment has come to call time on a conflict that has shown little sign, yet, of turning around.

The exhibit stays clear of advocacy on the current war. But if Britain's army commanders had wanted to send a discreet signal of their apprehension, they could hardly have done better than to encourage the museum to frame the exhibition as it has. Rebecca Hubbard, the museum's public relations chief, told me that the museum's royal charter buttresses its independence, although its \$8 million annual budget comes from the defense ministry. But it strains credulity to think the museum would not have consulted with its defense ministry patrons before proceeding.

What the exhibition's designers had in mind seems clear enough. First, there is the poster quoting Field Marshal Roberts, who was imperial Britain's most revered soldier. Then there is the first script that meets the visitor's eye at the exhibition. "British imperial forces fought three wars in Afghanistan," it says. "Currently this unforgiving battleground preys heavily on the minds of British politicians, soldiers and civilians alike, but the past has been largely forgotten. Afghanistan has a longer memory."

The exhibition's timing carries its own message. In the United States, the debate over Afghanistan is set to intensify as the December deadline set by President Obama for a review of the current war strategy approaches, focusing on the question of how the president's commitment to begin withdrawing American troops in July 2011 is to be met. In Britain, the new government of Prime Minister David Cameron has said that it intends to end Britain's combat rule by 2015, a deadline that matches the estimated date for the Afghan forces to have assumed overall combat responsibility for the war with the date set by the government for Britain's next general election.

British debate on the war found a new fulcrum in the past week with the formal handover to American marines of the British post at Sangin, a town of about 20,000 residents in the

north-central hinterland of Helmand province, a place often described as the most dangerous of all the war's outposts. Sangin has entered modern British folklore in much the way that Kabul did after the disaster of 1842, or Kandahar in 1880, as a deep wound in the national psyche. Of the 337 British troops who have lost their lives in Afghanistan, 200 of them since the start of last year, nearly a third, 106, have been killed in the attempt to secure Sangin.

The handover to the Americans will be completed over the next two weeks as a British force of about 1,100 transfers to a cluster of British strongholds in central Helmand, centered on the town of Lashkargarh. With 30,000 additional American troops to deploy, 20,000 of them to Helmand, American and British commanders have settled on a plan that has handed primary responsibility for the northern and southern tiers of the province to American troops, with a force of about 8,500 British troops, heavily overstretched, aggregating in the province's central districts.

Commanders have said that handing over Sangin is "a routine piece of battlefield relocation," not a vote of lack-of-confidence in the British troops, and that the new dispositions will allow the Americans and the British to achieve the "force density" levels — troop concentrations — that give them a better prospect of prevailing against the Taliban. Still, the withdrawal has touched a raw nerve. British defense experts have said that Sangin exposed the folly of a strategy that sent an overstretched, under-resourced force into the war's hottest crucible.

The use of poorly-protected Land-Rovers as troop transports, and a critical shortage of helicopters, made British units particularly vulnerable to Taliban's bombs. Attempting to inhibit Taliban movements by establishing a string of remote posts in the hinterland around the town increased the troops' vulnerability, without significantly enhancing security in the town. Overall, the British were never able to do much more than hold their own against the Taliban, for whom Sangin, as an important crossroads in the narcotics-trafficking that sustains the insurgency, became a vital target.

Relatives of the British soldiers killed there have agonized over the abandonment of territory won with British blood, but Mr. Cameron has offered solace.

"They did not die in vain," he said this week. "They made Afghanistan a safer place, and they will never be forgotten."

Still, the fact that the reassurance had to be offered spoke for the unease that has characterized much of the commentary here on the shortcomings the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have exposed in the British forces.

“Coming on the back of Britain’s inglorious departure from the southern Iraqi city of Basra two years ago, the shortfall in Helmand is likely to raise further questions in the Pentagon over the effectiveness and reliability of its closest ally,” the defense editor of the Times of London said in an article this week.

At the army museum, the misgivings run deeper.

The Duke of Wellington, victor over Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo, speaking as the army’s commander in chief in 1838, offers his own warning in one of the exhibition’s scripts.

“The consequence of crossing the Indus once to settle a government in Afghanistan will be a perennial march into that country,” he says, ahead of an incursion that ended by costing 16,000 British lives in the catastrophic retreat from Kabul in 1842.

An officer who served with the Grenadier Guards in Helmand in 2007, Patrick Hennessey, now a civilian, introduces the actors describing the disasters of the 19th-century wars, with a warning of his own. Comparing the army’s historic woes with his own experiences, he offers a sobering conclusion. “Anyone who underestimates the problems,” he says, “is going to come unstuck.”